



# Restoration – Cherish those Quirky Finds

STORY: Sue Rawle

*Here at Heritage Cob and Lime, we meet some lovely people and get a chance to work on houses that are both inspiring and interesting. One such project recently took us to the tiny village of Shop, near Morwenstow, North Cornwall, where Cobwell Barn awaited a major restoration.*

**F**or years, the cottage had been lost in a time warp from when the First World War began. The then owner was called up to serve for King and Country, and sadly never came back. Years later, when the property was sold,

his apron was still hanging on the handle of the back door, awaiting his return. The cottage, which we think dates back to at least 1650, served for many years as the village forge and still has a well underneath the floor, a secret that had lain hidden

for many years and one we were about to discover once we began work.

The owners of Cobwell Barn, Roger Farrell and folk singer and harpist, Hermione Swinford, bought the property and embarked on a labour of love to restore it. As with many



**LEFT:** Windows in place, stone work re-pointed with lime mortar. **ABOVE:** Slates are off, roof awaiting repair.  
**BELOW:** The well- it looks small but goes down 30 feet and turned out to be 6 feet in diameter.



busy families, such projects can be very time consuming and so Heritage Cob and Lime were called in to help.

The weather was fine when we began work, so we started on the outside, removing the roof of the cob and stone lean- to adjoining the house. New purlins and batons, along with new roofing felt and insulation, were topped with grey slate. Once the building was watertight with its new roof, we started work on the interior and this was when we discovered the wonderful find of a well, just inside the front door. A new floor needed to be laid, but first the old one had to be dug up and levelled, and there it was, hidden under a slate slab, a small, unassuming hole in the ground a little more than 18 inches square. The well proved to be far larger than it first appeared, reaching more than 30 feet in depth and over 6 feet across.

The floor was to be re-laid with cobbles around the entrance of the reclaimed

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**ABOVE:** Cobbling around well cover, pillar re-pointed with lime mortar, and steps now in situ. **BELOW LEFT:** Stain glass window in place- walls rendered with lime mortar. **BELOW RIGHT:** Wall in annexe lime rendered, leaving feature of window and beam showing

front door, and as the owners wanted to retain the well as a feature, it had to be safe to walk on yet left intact as part of the historical fabric of the building. A heavy duty iron mesh was designed by our team and fitted into place and then a local carpentry firm, WJB Carpentry, made a wonderful wooden inspection cover from American oak. The result is a fascinating talking point when visitors step through the front door.

Part of our role was to repair the cob walls in the lean-to, which we then rendered with lime mortar. The far end wall, which originally contained a window with another opening above, was stoned up to reach the rafters but with space left for a new window to be installed. Slowly a transformation began to take place with partition walls, electrics, drains and water installed, to make an office, toilet and shower room. Plus a laundry room, turning what was a redundant space into a useable, family friendly annexe, with modern facilities, yet keeping the original features where possible.

We carefully followed the natural nuances of the original walls so they kept their curves, no straight walls and ninety degree angles here. One lovely touch was to add a small, stained glass window of an oak leaf, which Hermione designed herself in memory of her eldest daughter, Athene,



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who was named after the goddess of wisdom. The tiny window, which measures no more than 8 inches by 5 inches, was made by Hermione's friend, Alice from nearby Welcome Potteries and we carefully put it in situ. It's truly delightful and a wonderful reminder of special memories for the owners.

As with many older properties, floor levels were a challenge, so inside the front door a step was added to link the house with the outside. New downpipes, with a drainage facility to take away storm water from the house were installed, whilst work began re-pointing the exterior wall with lime mortar. Where previously two windows had been boarded up with wooden shutters, two new window frames were handmade to fit the space. The result is plenty of light coming in from the outside, without destroying the natural line of the building. Slowly, the house was beginning to respond and bit by bit, history was being restored.

By now, we had also worked our way towards the sitting room, which needed to be re-plastered and the stonework re-pointed with lime mortar, bringing out



**ABOVE:** Ceiling restored, orange foam filler banished. **BELOW:** New staircase in place- walls re-rendered with lime mortar.

the natural delineations of the stones. A new interior door was fitted with glass panels to allow light to flood into the sitting room. Work now began in earnest on the ceiling, finally ridding the house of the unsightly orange foam filler that had rather dominated the décor when used by

a previous owner to fill gaps in ceiling and walls.

A bigger challenge awaited everyone as we had now reached the stage where the old staircase leading up from the living room had to be removed, and the new one installed. It had to be freestanding and put





**ABOVE:** Scat coat on wall of lean to, end wall stoned up and new window in place. **BELOW:** Close up of stonework near back door- the letter F was engraved in the original stone.

together in situ, and so local carpenter, Will Bellairs of WJB Carpentry, was called in to design and install an American Oak staircase. This gave all of us an interesting predicament- the old staircase had to come down, which meant the family had no way to get upstairs other than use a metal ladder. They very sensibly decided to leave us all to it for a week in the New Year, clearing the way for the carpenter to come in and start putting the staircase together, and for us to apply the scratch coat to the wall behind where the staircase was going to go. I have to say for this type of operation to be successful, it all comes down to close teamwork, and that's exactly what we all did. The result is a wonderful, handmade staircase, built specifically for the space.

The work is ongoing, as slowly but surely, with love, care and attention, the house is being restored, not to its former glory as a forge, but as a family home which has retained its character and all those lovely, quirky, features that make it a very special place to live.



The moral of the story is, take time to understand the history of your home and renovate it carefully, with attention to detail bringing it back to life. Revel in its

originality, for all older houses have a story to tell, and it's down to each and every one of us to make sure that it's heard for future generations to come.

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